

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 240NATION
2 March 1985

■ A VICTIM OF HISTORY

Who Wanted David Truong Put Away?

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In 1978 David Truong, a Vietnamese man living in the United States, was convicted on several counts of espionage in a Federal court. We believe, however, that Truong's real crime was working for reconciliation between the United States and Vietnam, that he was a victim of history.

Truong came to this country as a student in 1964. The son of Truong Dinh Dzu, who made a strong bid for the presidency of South Vietnam in 1967 as a peace candidate, David Truong was active in the U.S. antiwar movement during the 1960s. After the United States withdrew from Saigon in 1975, he devoted himself to working for the normalization

of relations with Vietnam through the American-Vietnamese Reconciliation Center. Aided by his father's prominence, he was an effective lobbyist in Congress.

In 1977, however, he was arrested and charged with passing State Department cables to a Vietnamese friend in Paris. The information was routine in nature, the kind of material any researcher can obtain nowadays under the Freedom of Information Act. The summary of the trial transcript contains this memorable paraphrase of a Central Intelligence Agency memorandum: "The CIA concluded that connection between the cables and U.S. defense is so attenuated that only a Jesuit could understand it." The key witness against Truong was a Vietnamese woman named Dung Krall, who worked as an informant for the C.I.A. and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Truong was sentenced to fifteen years in prison. Ronald L. Humphrey, the Foreign Service officer with the U.S. Information Agency who had given Truong the documents, received the same sentence. In January 1982, Truong began serving his time at the Federal prison in Lake Placid, New York.

During the next three years we visited him, first at Lake Placid and then at the correctional institution in Danbury, Connecticut, where he is currently incarcerated. From discussions with him, with his lawyers and with experts on Indochina, we became convinced that the severity of the sentence that he and Humphrey received can be attributed more to political considerations than to the crime of having passed seemingly harmless documents.

In 1977 there were two schools of thought in the Carter Administration on U.S. policy toward Vietnam. National security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski favored playing the "China card" against the Soviet Union, which meant siding with Beijing in its disputes with Hanoi. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance pushed for a restoration of relations with Vietnam. In May 1978, the month that Truong's trial began, Brzezinski visited China to discuss closer ties between the two countries. In November of that year the State Department broke off talks with the Vietnamese on a postwar settlement. On December 15, 1978, President Carter announced the normalization of diplomatic relations with China. Brzezinski's side had triumphed.

That was the context of Truong's trial. The Justice Department could have dismissed the case or had him deported. Instead the Carter Administration prosecuted him; it feared that failure to do so would provoke intense criticism from the right. The Justice Department also saw a chance to destroy what remained of the antiwar movement. Vietnam War historians whom we have interviewed have concluded that the American-Vietnamese Reconciliation Center was one of the most effective voices in this country for normalizing relations with Vietnam. Truong edited the center's Vietnamese-language newsletter for refugees in the United States, which strongly advocated reconciliation. Washington-based analysts and lawyers close to the case believe that Truong's activity with the center infuriated the Administration more than anything else he did. At a time when peace activists turned their attention to other issues,

the center remained one of the few organizations that pursued the normalization question. Putting Truong behind bars effectively silenced a key proponent of that policy.

Last year, the Appeals Board of the Federal Parole Commission ruled that Truong would be eligible for parole after five years. (For reasons that remain tantalizingly unclear, the board also ruled that Humphrey must serve ten years before being considered for parole.) Truong is scheduled for release on August 25, 1986. We have learned that the Immigration and Naturalization Service plans to deport him and has already begun the paper work. In a letter dated August 3, 1983, to the Appeals Board, Truong requested immediate parole and deportation to France. If the government intends to deport him, why doesn't it do so immediately? Letters sent to the National Appeals Board, U.S. Parole Commission, Chevy Chase, MD 20815 (copies to David Truong, c/o VNTSC, P.O. Box 53393, Washington, DC 20009) could speed up the process. □

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